

IN THE COURT OF THE CHILD: PSYCHOANALYSIS, NEURODIVERGENCE, AND THE VULNERABLE ACCUSED IN NETFLIX'S ADOLESCENCE

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2025, Netflix released *Adolescence*, a British crime drama told across four episodes, each filmed in a single take. The series follows the arrest and psychological unravelling of Jamie Miller, a 13-year-old boy accused of murdering his classmate, Katie Leonard. At first glance, the premise terrifies: a child as a perpetrator of sexualised violence, misogyny, and murder. Yet beneath its harrowing plot lies a quieter, more disturbing question—what if Jamie himself is a product of sustained abuse, misrecognition, and neurodivergence overlooked by every adult, including the justice system?

This essay combines legal analysis within the framework of English and Welsh youth justice with psychoanalytic critique, drawing on the writings of Sigmund Freud, Peter Goodrich, and Mariana Torgovnick. It contends that Jamie is a vulnerable accused

whose treatment by the criminal justice system reproduces the very traumas that shaped his alleged crime. His body becomes a site of symbolic meaning, transference, and juridical fantasy—projected with fear, guilt, and the law’s demand for moral clarity.

1. THE VULNERABLE ACCUSED AND THE LAW

In English law, a child over the age of ten is criminally responsible (Children and Young Persons Act 1933, s.50), but that does not diminish the safeguarding obligations of the state. Jamie’s interrogation at the police station, held with an appropriate adult and solicitor present, formally adheres to PACE 1984 and Code C. Yet, the presence of formality does not guarantee fairness.

Jamie visibly exhibits emotional dysregulation. His distress, withdrawal, and social confusion are interpreted as indicators of guilt rather than vulnerability. His interrogation and eventual confession are received not as cries for help, but as confirmation of deviance. In *R v L* [2011] EWCA Crim 1191, the Court of Appeal emphasised that child defendants require not only procedural safeguards but a total environment of fairness. Instead, Jamie is trapped within a symbolic architecture of guilt—constructed by institutional procedures, public perception, and interpretive bias.

The safeguarding framework in England and Wales acknowledges the principle of “child-first” justice, as endorsed by the Youth Justice Board. However, the practical application of this approach remains fragmented. In Jamie’s case, the absence of trauma-informed or neurodivergent-aware safeguarding procedures exposes a profound systemic failure.

2. PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE LAW'S DESIRE

Peter Goodrich's theory of legal semiotics and psychoanalysis suggests that legal meaning is shaped not only by statute and precedent, but also by symbols, performance, and cultural imagery. Jamie, as a character, is less a boy and more a vessel. His image is burdened by the projections of a society desperate for clarity in an era of online misogyny, school violence, and adolescent rage.

Freud might have called this a case of repetition and transference. Jamie repeats, through his violent outburst, the accumulated trauma of being publicly humiliated on social media, emotionally manipulated by his peers, and ignored at home. When Jamie

slams the table during his interview, a young viewer I spoke with from Manchester described the moment as "terrifying." Yet, when asked about the idea of a Lilith-type female character provoking a male peer, she acknowledged the phenomenon, even admitting that such dynamics might be part of adolescent experience. This is not to excuse violence, but to reveal the interaction as entangled in power and misrecognition.

This sense of transference reaches a haunting crescendo in one of the final scenes, when Jamie asks the therapist, "Do you think I'm a good person?" The therapist's silence does not affirm Jamie's morality or deny it—it leaves him suspended, symbolically unredeemed. Her silence is not neutral; it speaks to the collapse of professional boundaries, the weight of transference, and perhaps her own uncertainty. It captures the paralysis of adult authority—unable to assure, unable to condemn.

From Goodrich's perspective, the law is not neutral; it yearns for order, coherence, and a clearly defined culprit. Jamie's fragmented subjectivity—neither fully child nor fully criminal—disturbs this desire. Hence, he must be fixed in meaning, either as a monster or a victim. The series allows no such simplicity and therein lies its jurisprudential force.

3. NEURODIVERGENCE AND THE MISREAD SUBJECT

Nowhere in the series is Jamie's potential neurodivergence raised. Yet, his inability to read social cues, the rigidity of his reactions, and his impulsive emotional volatility suggest the possibility of undiagnosed autism or trauma-induced neurological disruption. Trauma, particularly repeated humiliation and sexual violation—as Jamie experiences through online shaming—can alter neural pathways in ways that mimic, compound, or coexist with neurodevelopmental conditions.

The law has only begun to grapple with these intersections in England and Wales. The Youth Justice Board's "child-first" framework urges trauma-informed practice, but it remains aspirational. The judicial system—and by extension, the viewer—judges Jamie on the appearance of deviance rather than the presence of disability.

The Equality Act 2010 and international obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) impose duties on public bodies, including

courts and police, to make reasonable adjustments for neurodivergent individuals. Jamie's case illustrates a breach of those duties. His neurodivergence is invisible, not because it is absent, but because the legal gaze has not been trained to perceive it.

4. LEGAL FRAMEWORK: SELF-DEFENCE, DIMINISHED RESPONSIBILITY AND TRAUMA

Could Jamie's act be understood as self-defence or a trauma-induced loss of control? Under s.76 of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008, self-defence requires the force used to be necessary and reasonable in the circumstances the defendant perceives. While Jamie's case lacks the imminence typically required under s.76, a broader interpretation—akin to cumulative provocation—might be warranted, particularly in light of his age and psychiatric profile.

Jamie's situation aligns more closely with the principles emerging from *R v Ahluwalia* [1992] 4 All ER 889, where the court recognised that a battered woman's delayed reaction to sustained abuse could reduce murder to manslaughter on grounds of diminished responsibility. Jamie, too, may have perceived his reality through a lens distorted by repeated social degradation, psychological abuse, and trauma.

Psychiatric evidence akin to Battered Woman Syndrome (BWS)—often a form of PTSD—is admissible to explain why a defendant acted disproportionately. Jamie's breakdown, his confession, and his impulsive violence might all be interpreted through the lens of complex PTSD or trauma-linked neurodivergence.

The principle of diminished responsibility under s.2 of the Homicide Act 1957 (as amended by the Coroners and Justice Act 2009) allows that a defendant whose mental function was substantially impaired may not bear full criminal culpability. Jamie's impairments—emotional dysregulation, social confusion, and impaired impulse control—should have opened this legal route.

5. AGENCY, TRANSFERENCE, AND THE QUESTION OF CHOICE

Jamie's final psychological assessment contains the most ethically fraught scene. When he asks the therapist, "Do you think I'm a good person?" he is not merely seeking affirmation—he is attempting to reconstruct moral coherence. The therapist's silence does not affirm nor deny; it leaves him suspended. Goodrich might argue that this is the

precise moment the legal subject becomes symbolic—a mirror onto which society reflects its ambivalence about childhood, gender, and guilt.

Did Jamie have agency? Might his act be understood as the breakdown of will rather than its expression? In cases like *R v Ahluwalia* and *R v Thornton* [1996] 1 WLR 1174, the courts recognised that chronic abuse might impair a person's ability to make free choices. Might the same logic apply to a 13-year-old boy—emotionally overwhelmed, degraded, and driven to the margins by prolonged harm? Could his act—awful as it is—also be a cry of defence?

This approach requires us to expand legal imagination. It does not absolve; rather, it probes: what forces shaped Jamie's choices, and what failures allowed those forces to go unchecked?

6. THE FAMILY AND THE SPECTACLE OF SHAME

Jamie's father, Eddie, is another central figure in this legal-symbolic theatre. His futile attempts to repaint his vandalised van mirror the impotence of parental authority. He cannot protect, nor redeem. When he encounters a man in the DIY store who expresses support for Jamie, the viewer is unsure: is this solidarity or something more sinister? It is this ambiguity that reveals Goodrich's thesis: the law, like narrative, is filled with eroticised dread—especially when gender and childhood collide.

Even more disturbing is the daughter's flirtatious gaze toward her father in the final scene. As the family prepares for Eddie's birthday outing, she emerges dressed in a manner that signals adult sexuality—directed, disturbingly, toward her father. Was it innocent mimicry? A cry for attention? Or a symptom of a household where boundaries have collapsed entirely? The ambiguity is chilling. And it raises a deeper question: did she know what was happening to Jamie? And if so, how did that knowledge shape her performance of femininity?

CONCLUSION: A JURISPRUDENCE OF VULNERABILITY

Adolescence is not merely a crime drama—it is a jurisprudential meditation on misread boyhood, the criminalisation of neurodivergence, and the law's craving for moral certainty in an era of symbolic disarray. Freud reveals the cycles of trauma and repetition. Goodrich demonstrates that the law sees through images, not merely texts.

Torgovnick reminds us that archetypes of femininity and guilt still haunt our moral landscape.

The case of Jamie Miller demands that we ask deeper questions: Are we truly safeguarding children, or scripting them into adult fantasies of justice and retribution? Can a neurodivergent child ever be fairly judged by a system constructed upon neurotypical assumptions?

My dissertation will continue this line of inquiry. For now, this legal essay concludes with a challenge: to view the vulnerable accused not as a monster to be punished, but as a mirror we fear to face. We must move toward a jurisprudence of care—one grounded in trauma-informed practice, neurodiversity recognition, and the psychoanalytic courage to ask: what is it we truly judge when we place a child in the dock?